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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001508

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: JVP PONDERS
PARTNERSHIP WITH PM

REF: COLOMBO 1503

Classified By: CHARGE' D'AFFAIRES JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,
D).

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) Following the August 26 Supreme Court decision that presidential elections must be held by November 22 (Reftel), the nationalist Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is facing a fierce internal debate about whether to support Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse or to run its own candidate. As the price for its support, the JVP has asked the noncommittal PM to endorse JVP positions on 12 controversial points of policy --points like the peace process and privatization, on which the JVP differed from its former SLFP coalition partner during their short-lived alliance. Rajapakse's dallying with the JVP may cost him votes from minority communities--as well as the full backing of incumbent President Chandrika Kumaratunga, a formidable and charismatic speaker whose full support on the campaign trail Rajapakse could well use. As always, the thinking of the ever-affable but seldom specific PM is difficult to discern. End summary.

JVP REDUX

[¶](#)2. (SBU) The Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is facing a fierce internal debate about whether to support current Prime Minister and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) presidential candidate Mahinda Rajapakse or to field its own candidate in the upcoming polls. (Note: The Election Commissioner still has not announced a date for presidential elections. According to the Supreme Court's August 26 ruling, however, the elections must take place between October 22 and November 22. End note.) JVP sources have told us that JVP patriarch and policy wonk Somawansa Amarasinghe is arguing against joining hands once more with the JVP's erstwhile coalition partner, while firebrand propagandist MP Wimal Weerawansa is pushing for his party to make common cause with Rajapakse, a populist politician with an agrarian southern Sinhalese voter base similar to the JVP's.

[¶](#)3. (C) JVP Party Leader Amarasinghe, a policy purist, reportedly does not want a repeat of SLFP "back-pedaling" on such crucial points as the peace process and privatization, which led to the eventual break-up of the United People's Front Alliance in June. By backing Rajapakse, Amarasinghe fears, the JVP's clear (some would say rigid) stand on these issues would be muddied and compromised by SLFP centrists. Instead, the JVP Leader wants his party to run its own candidate. Weerawansa, on the other hand, believes the promise of JVP support will be enough to move Rajapakse (left on economic issues; right on the peace process) to advance the party's goals--and to keep the opposition United National Party out of office. Weerawansa is supported in this bid by Rajapakse campaign manager and former Information Minister Mangala Samaraweera.

[¶](#)4. (U) There was no evidence of internal discord at an August 29 press conference in Colombo, however, in which Weerawansa announced that the JVP would support Rajapakse, provided that he endorse JVP positions on 12 separate points, including the peace process, the principle of a unitary Sri Lanka, privatization, and a proposed World Bank plan to modify secondary education. A document enumerating these points had been sent to the PM, Weerawansa said, adding that the JVP was awaiting his response before deciding on whether to run its own candidate.

OTHER PARTIES' SUPPORT SOUGHT

[¶](#)5. (SBU) Aside from a generic invitation at a public rally down south to all "progressive forces," including the JVP, to support his candidacy, the PM has made no direct overtures to the JVP since the Supreme Court announcement. Nor is he waiting for the JVP to make a decision before suing for the

support of other parties. On August 27 the PM's brother met separately with the leaders of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) to sound out prospects for their support, while a delegation from the Jathika Hela Urumayu (JHU), a right-wing Buddhist religious party that is currently part of the Opposition, was meeting the Prime Minister at COB August 29. (Note: The SLMC and CWC have not yet committed their support to either candidate.

In general, however, many observers are expecting the opposition United National Party to fare better with minority voters. End note.)

CHANDRIKA HOLDING BACK?

16. (C) Other than an anodyne assurance from the Presidential Secretariat that the upcoming polls will be free and fair,

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President Chandrika Kumaratunga has been uncharacteristically closed-mouthed since the August 26 Supreme Court decision. While her August 28 departure to China on a previously scheduled official visit may explain part of her silence, many observers are speculating that her own personal ambivalence toward the SLFP candidate--and reported suspicion that he may somehow have had a hand in the Supreme Court decision that ended her Presidential tenure a year earlier than she wished--is contributing to the comparative and atypical quiet from the President's House. Rajapakse's prospects for success depend, in large degree, on whether the President, a charismatic public speaker and formidable campaigner, decides to offer her visible support and talents to him along the electoral trail, according to some SLFP partisans. Nishantha Ranatunga, Executive Director of the state-owned Rupavahini Media Corporation and a long-time "Chandrika's man," told poloff on August 27 that such support from the President was not guaranteed. Presidential disquiet about reports of a possible JVP-Rajapakse rapprochement may also add to strained intra-party relations, SLFP sources said, especially since the President blames the JVP for abandoning the coalition (and destroying her majority in Parliament) and scuttling her carefully negotiated agreement on tsunami aid with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

COMMENT

17. (C) An independent JVP presidential candidacy would split the left-leaning rural southern vote--thereby helping the opposition United National Party (UNP) candidacy of former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The JVP must calculate how far to push its "principled" stand on its trademark issues of nationalism/no compromise with the Tigers/no privatization--and how much it may get from Rajapakse in return--without tipping the balance toward the UNP. Over the past year, the Prime Minister has successfully avoided taking controversial or potentially divisive public positions on the peace process or tsunami reconstruction, often telling VIP visitors that such matters were directly handled by President Kumaratunga (and he has even admitted in public that the President did not keep him abreast of peace process developments). While his public role over the past year may have been largely confined to ribbon cutting and tea drinking, Rajapakse is nonetheless a savvy operator, with a deft feel for the domestic political pulse and--a rarity in this corrosive environment--surprisingly few enemies. With the JVP ultimatum now before him, it will be difficult for the ever-affable, noncommittal Rajapakse to continue to dodge these thorny issues.

ENTWISTLE